

Choosing a baby's sex

Egginton, Joyce

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from JOYCE EGGINTON : New York, 31 May

A NEW YORK gynaecologist believes he has found a simple and almost foolproof way for parents to determine the sex of a baby before it is conceived.

As a result of his own research into sperm biology, Dr Landrum B Shettles, a professor of clinical obstetrics at Columbia University's college of physicians and surgeons, thinks he has positively identified two types of human sperm: a small round-headed variety which, he is convinced, carries the male-producing chromosomes, and an elongated variety which produces females.

In laboratory tests, Dr Shettles studied how the two types of sperm behaved in vaginal and cervical fluid. He found that the so-called male sperm were most likely to be killed off by the acid secretions of the vagina, while the female sperm were most vulnerable in the alkaline cervical fluid.

Dr Shettles explained: 'This means that if the first unrestricted intercourse of the month takes place right at ovulation time, when the cervical fluid increases 10-fold and is very alkaline, the male sperm will race through that like a cab going through Broadway on a green light.' So unless the husband is one of the rare types who produce only female sperm, the baby is almost certain to be a boy. Girls, Dr Shettles believes, are not conceived at ovulation time.

Acid for a girl

If, however, intercourse takes place about two days before ovulation, then by the time ovulation happens, the male sperm will have died and the female ones will still be there waiting to fertilise. 'For female sperm,' said Dr Shettles, 'it's like flying into La Guardia on a foggy night. They have to hover around and wait for the signal. Then they zoom right in.'

Hence his recipe for sex determination is simple. If a girl is wanted, the wife should use an acid douche (two tablespoons of vinegar to a quart of water) just before intercourse, which should be timed two or three days before ovulation, without prior abstinence. For a boy, an alkaline douche (two tablespoons of baking soda to a quart of water) should be used before intercourse, which should take place at ovulation time, with prior abstinence.

'If a woman does it carefully, with the douche and timing, I believe that 85 to 90 per cent of cases could be determined,' Dr Shettles said.

His sex-determination theory has met some severe questioning within the medical profession, and Dr Shettles concedes: 'I can't be positive about it, but I certainly believe in it. Anyway, no one can object to it. It's simple. It's safe. It's not distasteful. It can be done at home. And there's no harm in trying it.'

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